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ABSTRACT

This report begins with a brief history of the City University of New York (CUNY), including the institution of its "Open Admissions Policy," and the end to free tuition. During the late 70's and early 80's, CUNY began to bring order to the chaos of remedial experiments brought on by open admissions. Assessment tests in reading, writing, and mathematics were introduced and given to freshmen for placement purposes. All students scoring below specific cut-off scores were directed into remedial programs. The paper explains the current crisis over remediation, ignited by Mayor Guliani's criticisms of CUNY's standards, and describes the creation of the Comprehensive Action Plan (CAP), which addresses student preparedness for college. As of yet, CAP is not finished and remains controversial among faculty, students, and politicians. CAP's main objectives include introducing the SAT as a requirement for admission to the senior colleges, administering assessment tests earlier to allow time for pre-collegiate summer remedial or ESL programs, and placing a one-year limit on remediation and a three-semester limit on ESL at the community colleges. (EMH)

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Presentation on Remediation at CUNY

American Association of Community Colleges
April 26, 1998

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The purpose of my presentation today is to alert you to an important political debate at The City University of New York on remediation in our colleges. This debate has potential national significance. I begin with some historical background.

Prior to the 1960's the public colleges of New York City were a loosely organized, municipally–supported confederation of senior colleges (the first community colleges were founded in the 1950's). Highly selective in their admissions, their most democratic feature was free tuition.

In the 1960's the increased demand for higher education from the Baby Boom generation led, first, to the creation of new senior and community colleges and their consolidation in a single system known as The City University of New York (CUNY). At the end of the decade, in response to the pressure for equal educational opportunity from expanding African-

American and Puerto Rican populations, as well as traditional white ethnic groups, CUNY declared a policy of Open Admissions, guaranteeing all high school graduates a place somewhere in the system. Open Admissions entailed not only a place for all high school graduates in the community colleges, but expanded access for "the economically and educationally disadvantaged" at the senior colleges, through expanded use of class rank in the admissions criteria and through special opportunity programs that admitted otherwise unqualified students with additional academic support systems.

Open Admissions, introduced in 1970, when tuition was still free, naturally brought on an abrupt spiking of enrollment and chaotic overcrowding. The University barely had time to adjust to these new conditions before the City and State went into a financial crisis in 1976, as a result of which CUNY was forced to abandon its 130-year tradition of free tuition. Enrollment dropped by 20 percent in 1 year and 30 percent over 5 years.

From its low point in the mid-70's CUNY slowly rebuilt with significant help from New York State. Over several years in the late 1970's and early 80's, the State assumed full funding for the senior colleges, while the

community colleges were funded one-third each by the City, the State, and student tuition (largely financed by State and Federal financial aid). The State also poured millions into rebuilding CUNY's campuses. Enrollment, supported by the City's growing immigrant population, recovered from its low of 172,000 in 1980 to a high of 213,000 in 1994, although never recovering to the Open Admissions/Free Tuition peak of 253,000 reached in 1974.

During the late 1970's and early 80's CUNY also began to bring order to a creative chaos of remedial experiments begun with Open Admissions. The University introduced three Freshman Skills Assessment Tests (FSAT's) in reading, writing, and mathematics, which were administered to incoming freshman for purposes of placement in non-credit, remedial or credit-bearing, college-level courses. All students scoring below specific cut-off scores were directed into remedial programs, with the colleges determining specific placements in their remedial sequences on the basis of the students' scores and other indicators. Sometimes colleges also used these tests to assess readiness to exit from remedial courses, although that was not required by the University. The University did require that students pass all three FSAT's before transferring from a community college to a senior

college and, for students who entered the senior colleges directly, before advancing to the upper division.

Throughout the initial 30 years of the City University, from 1962 until 1993, the City and State of New York were both governed by Democrats, except for the liberal Republicans Nelson Rockefeller and John Lindsay who served as Governor and Mayor in the 1960's and early 70's. Democrats and liberal Republicans were generally supportive of expanded access to higher education and responsive to urban and minority constituencies who depended on the public universities. These conditions changed abruptly with the election of Rudolf Giuliani as Mayor and George Pataki as Governor in 1993 and 1994, respectively. Both men were conservatives with national ambitions. Both pledged to reduce taxes and the scope of government. Both, but particularly the Governor, have a strong influence on CUNY's budget. Together the Governor and the Mayor appoint 15 of the 17 members of the CUNY Board of Trustees.

The first impact of the new regimes in Albany and City Hall was on the University's budget. It was not until the summer of 1996, when a significant number of holdover trustees were replaced, that CUNY's academic policies

came under direct scrutiny from a new majority on the Board of Trustees. From the start the new Board showed a particular interest in remediation, testing, alleged grade inflation, and standards. In the spring of 1997, Governor Pataki replaced the holdover chair of the Board with a conservative academic from a private university. Several months later Chancellor Ann Reynolds, who had become the butt of trustee criticism of low standards at the University, resigned to take another position.

The current crisis over remediation was ignited by a lengthy, surprise attack on CUNY by Mayor Giuliani in his State of the City Address on January 14 of this year. CUNY, the Mayor charged, had abandoned all standards. The proof? Only 32 percent of incoming students at the senior colleges and 14 percent at the community colleges passed all three of the University's Freshman Skills Assessment Tests, demonstrating their preparedness for college-level work. Furthermore, only 1 percent of community college students earned a degree in 2 years, and less than 9 percent of senior college students earned a degree in 4 years.

Ignoring the connection between the students' initial underpreparedness and their extended path to the degree, the Mayor did not bother to cite longer-

term graduation rates. Instead he hastened towards his prescription for the University: The Board of Trustees should immediately institute "an entrance examination which demonstrates that applicants can meet and achieve passing grades in the basic subjects of learning." And what about the thousands of high school graduates and GED recipients who did not score above the cut-offs on the FSAT's? The Mayor threw out only a vague suggestion that remediation should be "privatized."

In response to the Mayor's call, picked up in the tabloid press and reinforced by other political forces, the Board Chairwoman, working with the Interim Chancellor, quickly developed a Comprehensive Action Plan (CAP) billed as "an overarching policy concerning the preparedness of students for college level work at the City University of New York." As we meet today, CAP is still an unfinished and highly contested document. Major opposition has developed among faculty, students, and Democratic politicians in City and State government. The Board has not as yet been able to assemble a majority behind any single version. Nevertheless, the main lines of CAP are clear. They include:

1. Introduction of the SAT as a requirement for admission to the senior

colleges, although no minimum score is yet specified. (Admission to the senior colleges currently depends on high school grades and class rank.)

2. Required TOEFL scores for graduates of non-English-speaking high schools. Again, no minimum score is specified.

3. Earlier administration of the FSAT's to allow time for pre-collegiate summer intensive remedial or ESL programs.

4. A one-year limit on remediation and a three-semester limit on ESL at the community colleges, and, at the senior colleges, a one-semester limit on remediation and a two-semester limit on ESL.

5. A limit of two failures in any remedial or ESL course at the community colleges (this limit is already in force at the senior colleges).

6. A single, University-wide exam to determine exit from remediation.

Obviously, from the point of view of the community colleges, CAP is a great improvement over the draconian measures proposed by Mayor Giuliani.

Still, faculty and staff have major reservations about specific elements of the plan, as well as its overall philosophy and the idea that lay Trustees, or the politicians who appoint them, should be making decisions at all about the best method of assessing and improving student preparation in the basic skills and the English language.

The debate over remediation at The City University of New York suggests a new front in the national debate over access that can also be seen, for example, in measures restricting affirmative action in college admissions and limiting training and educational opportunities for welfare recipients and prisoners. Our best defense against such attacks is the demonstrable success of community colleges in affording the "second chance" to participate in our high-skills economy for millions of Americans of all ages and backgrounds. At the same time, we must demonstrate our continuing efforts to find more effective ways to overcome the educational deficiencies of our incoming students, to maintain and enhance the basic skills we develop in remedial courses throughout our students' collegiate program, and to raise the standards to which we hold, not our incoming students, but our graduates.